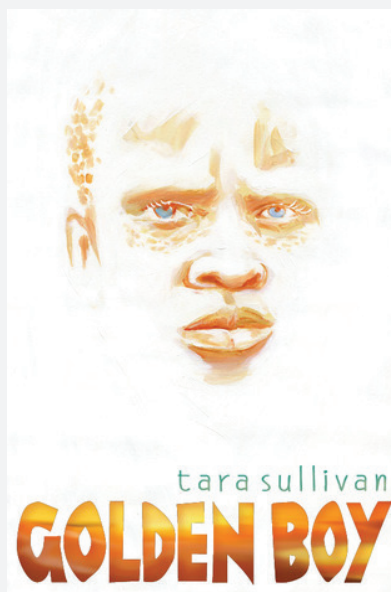


Second Reaction: *Golden Boy*

Sullivan, Tara. *Golden Boy*.
New York: Penguin Group, 2013. Print.

Marti Brown



Golden Boy is a fictional account of a Tanzanian boy with albinism, but the events of the story are based on actual events in present-day Africa. First-time author Tara Sullivan introduces us to Habo, a thirteen-year-old boy living in a rural area of Tanzania, helping his family run their struggling farm. However, Habo is not a normal boy, but is a “zeruzeru” or albino, someone who lacks pigmentation in his skin, hair, and eyes. This condition, which is not understood in Habo’s small village, results in a number of difficulties for him and his family. Because Habo does not look like his parents and siblings, his father abandoned them; his skin burns easily, making him unfit for the outdoor work that his brothers do to support the family, and his blue eyes are weak, making it hard for him to do his school work.

Those haunting blue eyes on the cover of *Golden Boy* draw the reader to the book. The striking yet washed out face on the cover looks like a ghost boy, a name that people often call Habo. Like the nearly invisible image on the cover, Habo constantly feels invisible, both in his family and in his community. Only his sister, Asu, cherishes him and calls him her golden boy.

When Habo’s family gets evicted from their farm, they must travel across the country to live with his aunt. It seems as if his life cannot get any more difficult. But when he arrives at

his new home, he learns a horrifying fact: albinos are considered to be such “good luck” in the city that people hunt them for their body parts like endangered animals. Not only must Habo learn to live with the normal prejudices and difficulties that come with having albinism, but now he must do so while evading trophy-hunting killers. Only when Habo flees his home and crosses paths with a blind artist who can’t see his ghost-like face does he begin to realize that his worth is not tied to how the world sees him, but how he chooses to see himself.

Sullivan has done an excellent job of bringing Habo’s story to life and, by extension, shedding light on the plight of real-life albinos in Tanzania. Though Sullivan is American, her international experience prepared her well to write this story. According to her biography, after spending most of her childhood living abroad with parents who were international aid-workers, she traveled to Tanzania to learn first-hand about life there for those with albinism. Not only has she created a tale that will have readers on the edge of their seats, but she has brought attention to a nightmarish phenomenon happening right now in Tanzania and other countries in Africa, especially in the eastern parts of the continent. Sadly, due to lack of education, many people in these areas believe that those suffering from albinism are cursed (Asante Mariamu Foundation). As a result, they often face discrimination, increased risk of deadly skin cancer from ignorance of sun safety, and violence. Additional resources for learning about albinism and how people can help those with the condition are available at the end of this review. In addition, the author has included a glossary of Kiswahili words and phrases used throughout the book, as well as a discussion guide.

Three of my high school students read and reviewed this book with me. Although they were horrified to learn of albinos like Habo being hunted for their body parts, they were almost equally shocked by Habo’s complicated relationship with his family. One of my students said, “His father left, his brothers mock him, and his mother ignores him.” None of them felt that Habo’s albinism was an excuse for the isolation and disdain that he endured from the people who are supposed to love and protect him. They were also surprised that Habo was able to survive alone for so long without his family and said that they would not have been able to stay away from their families as long as he did. The living conditions depicted in *Golden Boy* were another source of surprise. Habo’s aunt, who is “so fat, she fills the doorway,” (62) is looked upon jealously by her extended family because she has obviously never missed a meal—something that makes her wealthy despite not even having enough beds in her home for each of her children. Reading *Golden Boy* has definitely been an eye-opening experience for both me and my students.

Golden Boy would be a wonderful addition to any classroom or library. The age recommendations for *Golden Boy* range from high school only to middle school only, depending on the book vendor. Because of his albinism, Habo lives under constant threat of violence, which may be frightening to some younger readers. However, I think the book would be appropriate for both middle and high school students because the ultimate message is very positive, as

he finds the courage to stand up for himself, work through his problems with his family, and use the resources at hand to keep himself safe from his would-be attackers.

The subject matter of the book is timely and lends itself to a wide variety of content areas. Social studies subjects such as geography, African studies, and world cultures, to name a few, would be the most obvious choices in which to use *Golden Boy*, but science classes studying topics such as genetics, animal conservation, and environmental conservation could also find tie-ins to this text. Teachers who need a book to jump-start a project-based learning unit need look no further as this book includes a wealth of resources at the end of the text for students who want to learn more and get involved with helping those with albinism. In short, I highly recommend *Golden Boy*, a beautiful tale of perseverance and hope in the face of physical and societal limitations.

Student Contributors

Dasha Miller, Kelly Smeby, Aric Strickland

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About the Author

Marti Brown received her bachelor's degree in anthropology from Western Kentucky University and her master's and specialist degrees in Library & Information Science from the University of South Carolina. She works as a high school librarian at Westwood High School in Blythewood, South Carolina and travels whenever possible.